

Rodin and classical sculpture

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Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) may seem an unlikely subject for an article in a classical magazine. He is, after all, usually called by fellow-sculptors and art historians the founder of modern sculpture, an artist who (in the words of one critic) ‘put sculpture into an area where it had not been before’. In the only one-man show held in Paris during his lifetime (at the Pavillon de l’Alma, in 1900), his work was described as ‘most modern’; his studio was a place of pilgrimage for the artists attending the exhibition; the leading Symbolist writers and poets organized a banquet in his honour. He was the very model of the innovative and pioneering sculptor. So what could possibly connect this formidable artist with classical antiquity, and be of interest to twenty-first century students of Classics? There are several things which form such a connection: Rodin’s own education, training, and early work; the subjects of several of his works; his personal collection of antiquities; and his self-confessed love of ‘the Antique’. This modern Pheidias (so called in one of the earliest reviews of his exhibited work) was a great admirer of his Athenian predecessor and spoke admiringly of the contemporary Polycleitus.

Early work

At school Rodin learnt Latin but (in his words) ‘I don’t know why, but I didn’t like Latin’. He did however like classical literature. When he first started earning money from his sculpture he began to build a library which consisted of over 30,000 books at his death; there is a bill from 1874 for books in French translation by Lucian, Lucretius, Plutarch, and Seneca. He also had several different translations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a source of the titles of several of his works: for Rodin, to give a pair of figures a title from Ovid such as ‘Pygmalion and Galatea’ was an obvious outgrowth from his education. Like all young artists in the middle of the nineteenth century Rodin had to start his training by drawing from casts of ancient sculptures, a practice which he later condemned, saying that the appreciation of classical art should come when an artist is trained and competent. In his sculpture

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he adopted the Greek method of studying what lay underneath the surface. Throughout his career the key component in his work was modelling in depth. Rodin said that, like the ancients, he never did a surface without imagining the bones and muscles beneath.

His first significant sculpture was a portrait of his father, Jean-Baptiste Rodin, which greatly resembles the Roman imperial busts which Rodin saw in profusion in the Louvre. His father did not like the sculpture because his beard had been removed, an act described as ‘Oedipal’ by one art historian – though the artist himself says that he omitted the whiskers because ‘he was treating the bust as an antique’, i.e. like a Roman portrait. The next major sculpture he produced was the remarkable *Man with a broken nose*, which owes much to the precedent of Roman veristic portraiture and bears a resemblance to the *Seated boxer* in Rome’s Terme Museum (though the latter piece was not discovered until 1885 and Rodin’s sculpture reveals a significant bond of affection between the artist and his model, Bibi, which is lacking in the classical work).

Both of these early bronzes, together with a marble figure of 1877 which decorated the Brussels Academy of Art and is derived from the classical *Belvedere torso*, reflect Rodin’s awareness of the past. They also show that he transformed what he learned from his artistic predecessors to create personal works of profound emotional and intellectual impact.

The age of bronze

Rodin’s first monumental statue of a nude male figure (itself, of course, a tradition fixed in Western Art by the ancient Greeks) was originally called *The vanquished one*. The sculptor likened it to an ancient Apollo which he had seen in Naples. It was originally exhibited in Brussels where the critic Jean Rousseau compared it to the best works of the Greeks and the Florentines (i.e. Pheidias

and Michelangelo). It was praised for its excellent rendering of broad planes, its balance and firmness, and the understanding of the human anatomy. The second, and more familiar, name of *The age of bronze* was used for its next exhibition in Paris (where explicit references to defeat in 1877, so soon after the Franco-Prussian war, were probably thought to be insensitive), deliberately recalling the Hesiodic metallic ages: the figure is painfully aware of the shift from Silver to Bronze, the latter being characterized by sufferings such as war (Hesiod: ‘they loved the groans and violence of war’). Although it is most notable for its anatomical realism (many critics refused to believe that Rodin had not taken a body cast from his model, a 22-year-old soldier called Auguste Neyt), it also shows some of the traits of contrapposto composition which Rodin himself analysed and admired in Polycleitus’ *Man tying a ribbon* – look at the knees, hips, and shoulders, for instance. There is, however, less a sense of working with a plumb-line than either the Greek precedents or those by Michelangelo, such as *The dying slave* in the Louvre. The closely placed feet are one example of a significant difference. The facial expression, the raised arms, and the hesitant forward movement, so eloquently evoking a man opening himself up to pain, are definitely not classical.

Classical subjects

A survey of the titles of Rodin’s sculptures reveals that many bear names that are taken from classical mythology and literature, either explicitly or allegorically. It is not clear whether the title was significant for the sculptor himself, since there are very many examples of pieces having more than one name (such as *The age of bronze*). Divinities like Aphrodite, Apollo, Bacchus, Aesculapius, Mercury, Iris, and Minerva appear. There is one piece called *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, as well as many others with titles derived from stories in the epic, such as the marble group in New York, *Orpheus and*

Eurydice.

He even uses an occasional Latin phrase such as *Fugit Amor*. This small bronze of c. 1886 is related to a scene on the monumental *Gates of Hell* and is very similar to the 'Fall of Icarus' (another story in Ovid). One critic has written of *Fugit Amor* that 'all of Rodin's art is in this small bronze, more sorrowful than any of Baudelaire's poems'. I could not find evidence that when he gave the piece its title Rodin was specifically using the line in Propertius that contains it: 'what a great love has escaped (*fugit amor*) in such a short time'.

Rodin liked the monsters and villains of mythology. There are a siren and a sphinx, a Polyphemus and a Medusa, a Minotaur and (once again on the *Gates of Hell*) a magnificent centauress, a figure probably inspired by another character in Ovid – Hylonomē in *Metamorphoses* book 12. With all those books in Rodin's personal library as well as the paintings and sculptures on view at the Louvre, there was no shortage of classical inspiration either for his subjects or for his titles.

Rodin as collector

Around 1893 Rodin started a collection of antiquities which was to become never less than a passion and sometimes an obsession. In the Musée Rodin in Paris several of his collected pieces are on display. In photographs of his studios and homes the objects which he amassed are everywhere visible.

One significant sculpture eluded him, but his pursuit of it gives an indication of his obsessive nature as a collector. He saw a Hellenistic head of a young goddess (possibly Aphrodite) at an exhibition in London in the spring of 1903. Rodin was not the only person to admire it; the reviewer in *The Morning Post* says of it amongst other things, 'It's life itself. It embodies all that is beautiful, life itself, beauty itself. It is admirable. It is a flower, a perfect gem'. And Rodin wanted it. He wrote to John Marshall, an archaeologist friend of its owner, offering a trade: 'May I propose to you *The figure with spread limbs* [now more usually called *Iris*] and *The Danaid* for example?' There were other possible combinations. He also proposed a trip to Greece with Marshall. When these approaches failed he offered to keep the sculpture only during his lifetime. But by August 1904 it was confirmed that his pursuit was useless: the owner, E. P. Warren (who later donated the great marble version of Rodin's *Kiss* (right) to the Tate), was not going to budge. Rodin did not let it rest there because in November 1904 he published an article on *The Warren Head*, which is one of his finest pieces of writing on art and in which he declares his love of the classical and the reasons for his collection. The head, inci-

dentally, now resides in the Museum of Fine Art in Boston, where it is generally known as the *Chios Head*.

Despite this one that got away Rodin's collection continued to grow and at his death he had in his possession nearly 1,000 pieces of Egyptian art, nearly 1,500 casts, 800 Greek or Roman statues in marble or stone, 600 Greek vases, 500 Greek terracotta figurines, 450 Greek or Roman bronzes and 150 pieces of Greek or Roman glassware.

Rodin and the partial

One aspect of Rodin's collecting and his love of the classical sculptures which he saw in museums was to have a profound influence on the history of twentieth century art. Although he never realized his dream of travelling to Greece, he did visit Italy and, after his visit to see the Parthenon sculptures in the British Museum in 1881, he was a frequent visitor to London. He wrote eloquently about the skills of the ancient sculptors, about their truthfulness to nature, and their creative handling of volume, material, light, and shadow. He was not deterred by the sculptures' broken, damaged or incomplete state. In fact the opposite is true: for Rodin ancient sculpture had been stripped to its essentials by the destructive effects of time, but in that reduced state it was the embodiment of absolute beauty. He once wrote to the *Venus de Milo*: 'Dismembered though you are, [to us] you are nonetheless complete. The destruction wrought by time has been permitted so that all may see the importance of its impious endeavour'. Through his contact with the antique (and the effects of time on its sculpture) he began to incorporate this as a fourth dimension in his own sculpture. Look at *The walking man* (c. 1899) or *Iris* (c. 1890) – the figures are deliberately fragmentary and unfinished. This echo of the antique, the partial figure, was to be his main contribution to the next generation of early modern pioneers of sculpture. There are works by Picasso, Duchamp-Villon, Maillol, Matisse and many others which show how quickly this was absorbed and translated. There are many possible juxtapositions to illustrate this sequence of influences: take the torso of (?) Hermes from the west pediment of the Parthenon (438–3 B.C.), then Rodin's *Torso of the walking man* (1889), and next Brancusi's *Torso of a young man* (1917) – you will see where this development was heading.

For Rodin themes that dominated his work link him directly with classical artists: the emotional significance of the human body, the powerful suggestiveness of gesture, a pose, even musculature rhythm. But he developed new forms; he had a new vision of the human body; he

exhibited fragments as whole works; he was a prodigiously skilful modeller, which meant that the surfaces of his works are unlike anything seen before. But the man who said that 'No artist will ever surpass Pheidias' and who was himself frequently compared to Pheidias as a colossus of his age is surely worthy of the attention of students of the classics.

Stephen Chambers who normally teaches classics at Oundle School was able to research this topic at Stanford University, home to over 200 sculptures by Rodin.